For Better or For Worse? : Female Labour Migration in Southeast Asia

Supang Chantavanich

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/arv

Part of the Asian Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Chantavanich, Supang (2001) "For Better or For Worse? : Female Labour Migration in Southeast Asia,"
DOI: 10.58837/CHULA.ARV.14.1.5
Available at: https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/arv/vol14/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Chulalongkorn Journal Online (CUJO) at Chula Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asian Review by an authorized editor of Chula Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ChulaDC@car.chula.ac.th.
For Better or For Worse? : Female Labour Migration in Southeast Asia

Supang Chantavanich

Abstract

This study focused on female labour migration from four countries in Southeast Asia; namely Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Yunnan-China. The research covered a sample of 387 female returnees from the afore-mentioned countries who had migrated internationally for employment. The major findings for each of the countries’s case studies are summarised as follows. They were engaged mainly in the services sector, i.e., engaged as domestic helpers, caregivers, entertainers and sex workers. Some were hired in the manufacturing sector and a few to do agricultural work.

All migrants from Yunnan were undocumented while those from the other three countries were both documented and undocumented. Thus, cases of trafficking could be found mostly in Yunnan but also to a lesser extent in the Philippines and Thailand.

Many returnees were married with children when they migrated, generally between the ages of 20-35 years. In most cases, the husband would help with household work when the wives were away. All female workers earned some income during their time abroad and many remitted money to their parents of family at home. While they were

* This article is based on the research report entitled Female Labour Migration in Southeast Asia: Change and Continuity published by the Asian Research Center for Migration, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University with the support from the Asia-Pacific Migration Research Network and the Ford Foundation. The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of the research team and the editors of this volume.
working overseas, some women experienced physical violence and/or sexual harassment.

Once they returned to their places of origin, female migrants faced differing situations. Most Indonesian women went back to their agricultural work, while many Filipinos attempted to migrate again rather than look for work in the Philippines. Thai females often engaged in local service work or became self-employed although many wanted to emigrate again. Yunnanese women generally returned to their housework and farm and few started their own businesses. There were few economic reintegration programmes to absorb returned women in their own country or community, making them vulnerable for re-migration. Thai, Filipino and Chinese women generally reported that they had higher self-confidence and more independence after their return.

In all, labour migration of women from the four countries indicated that there were cases of both legal migration and human smuggling (where women were voluntarily smuggled.) Migrant women were empowered economically when they worked abroad because they had a higher income and they could send remittances home. On the other hand, they were socially vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and sexual harassment. When women returned home, the situation was reversed: They were economically vulnerable because of a general lack of income but socially empowered due to their higher social status and self-confidence, which they had developed. However, family disruptions such as divorce, infidelity and estrangement from children did occur and rendered some women socially vulnerable. Many returned female workers did not succeed in reintegrating themselves into the old social, cultural and economic contexts of their former lives.
For Better or For Worse?: Female Labour Migration in Southeast Asia

Migration flows from Southeast Asia have been observed for more than three decades. Population mobility with the aim of overseas employment has become one of the alternatives for Southeast Asians to lift up their income and find new life opportunities in destination countries. Within such population flows, the number of woman migrants increased in the 1990s, making female migrants outnumber male ones in Indonesia and the Philippines at the end of the decade. Nonetheless, our knowledge about their becoming is minimal. Conceptually, until the 1980s, female migrants remained largely absent from migration theory which assumed migrants were non-gendered beings. Early work on female migrants was largely concerned with ‘adding women’ to existing migration research. A large number of studies on women’s migration flows and experiences followed. However, there is a significant over-representation in the global debate on the experience of migrant women who enter highly industrialized countries of permanent settlement (North America, Europe and Australia). The experience of Southeast Asian women, who engage in temporary and circulatory international labour migration in Asian and Gulf countries has not received the same attention on the international level, and has not been incorporated in the same way in the international debate on how to conceptualize international female labour migration.

In the 1990s an increasing concern with the underlying theoretical constructs of migration theory emerged among migration and gender researchers. The difficulties were the same as experienced by all who seek to establish a common theory on labour migration. In order to shed some light on the links between gender and migration in Southeast Asia, a research project was coordinated by the Asian Research Center for Migration at Chulalongkorn University Thailand in the year 2000 to examine female international labour migration in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Yunnan (China). A sample of 387 female returnees from the 4 countries who had migrated internationally for employment and their family members were interviewed. Community
leaders and some other key informants were also interviewed for data beyond individual and household levels.

Conventional theories on migration have touched very little on gender aspect as observed by Wrights (1995). They assumed that men and women are subject to the same motivation for migration. However, when looking into networking theory, a few studies have found that women are good at cultivating social networks which serve as migration networks for friends and kin. Class and religion are important factors in generating such networks (Salaff 1997; and Rahaman 1999). In the process of migration, it was found out that men and women have differing access to critical resources such as information and capital to finance the move (Ellis, Conway and Bailey 1996). Yet, the details of such differing access were not given.

Many women entered into factory work and the services sector for employment. Some studies have demonstrated that female workers are exploited in foreign countries (Heyzer and Wee 1994). Some scholar even pointed that female labour is a form of “social dumping” as reproductive work is de-valued in countries of destination and only female migrants are willing to take such employment (Truong 1996). Particular concern has been expressed about female migrant workers’ vulnerability to abuse and violence, especially those who are domestic helpers and live in the same household with their employers (Shah and Menon 1998). With regard to women in the entertainment sector, their situation has been less incorporated into international debates on female labour migration theories.

If we focus on female labour migration from Southeast Asia, the issues of protection emerge: the vulnerable situation of women derives from the fact that they are both “migrants and women” (Lim and Oishi 1996). They are thus vulnerable to financial exploitation, physical and mental abuse in the workplace, deceptive contractual arrangements, disproportionate recruitment charges, low wages and other kinds of exploitation.

Female migration has impact on family and household since women are mothers, daughters, or sisters in their family. Their absence requires somebody else to fulfill the responsibilities they have at home.
Surprisingly, not many studies focus on this topic. Some women migrants continue their mothering role when they are far away from their children and become “transnational mother” (Hondagnen-Sotelo and Avila 1997). Once women return home, the impact of the return process on the individual, household and community remains unclear. Some study indicates the change in returnees’ status as many husbands have higher respects for their returned wives and take on more childrearing roles. Apart from spouse, members of extended family also cover many of the functions usually carried out by the absent woman (Hugo 1995). There is not much information on where migrants actually return too. Some are found in the villages of origin but many move to urban areas.

In this article, the experiences and process of female migration are evaluated with respect to the extent of their decision to leave, their social status prior to and after migration, and their return. Women’s empowerment in the decision making on life choices, the definition of their migration goals, the spending of resources and their return to the household and community in the origin society are examined.

Findings of the Study

Philippines

The study in the Philippines was conducted in Luzon, (including Metro Manila), Visayas and Mindanao with 100 female returnees using purposive sampling.

At the time of the interviews, most women (70%) were married with one to three children (58%), although 40% were married overseas. They were aged between 25-39 (77%), with 38% having completed high school and 26% having completed college. Prior to migration, 21% were factory workers, 37% were in service work and sales and very few (1%) worked in agriculture. The majority of them went to Hong Kong (34%) and Taiwan (32%). Their overseas employment ranged from

---

1 The Philippines case study was conducted by Dr. Maruja Asis of Scalabrini Migration Centre, Quezon City.
work as domestic helpers (60%), factory workers (22%) to entertainers (13%).

Economic gain was the most significant motivating factor for the women’s decision to work abroad. Most women (77%) made the decision to work abroad on their own. 66% of the sample secured jobs through recruitment agencies, some (13.4%) through family and social networks and few (8.2%) went undocumented. Thus, victimization by illegal recruiters was generally low. Due to its long-term experience in handling overseas employment, the Philippines can offer adequate preparation prior to workers’ departure as 84% of respondents underwent such preparation. The programme includes Pre-Departure Orientation Seminars (PDOS), and skills training (household skills, electronics, language, etc).

Once female workers were overseas, 87% of them encountered some problems, mainly with employers, family back in the Philippines or other workers. Since most workers worked as domestic helpers, problems with employers ranked the highest (43%). Factory workers had problems with production quotas, which forced them to work longer hours without additional compensation. In general, although female workers heard a lot about physical violence or sexual harassment, only 11% of respondents had personally experienced such problems.

The impact of migration on women and their families were both economic and social. Their remittances improved the family’s economic status, although migrants themselves may not have had clear economic benefits from their labour migration. Gender and intergenerational relations in the family had changed in the women’s absence. Childcare responsibilities went more to parents and other family members (62%) than to the husband (37%) and so did other housework. However, it must be borne in mind that there are more single Filipinos who migrate (56%) than married. Among those married, communication is the foundation for good relationships. In some cases husbands had extramarital affairs. As for their children, a lack of closeness with the children appears to be more of a problem for migrant mothers than delinquent or spoiled children as may have been expected. For the women themselves, the positive impacts of migration were their internal changes: they gained independence, self-confidence, and a broader
perspective on life. Negative impacts of migration are considered insignificant when compared with the benefits. Most women returned home involuntarily, because the work contract expired. Thus, the return was mostly temporary. Half of the returnees took up some economic activities especially in business or self-employment, as those were the primary options for former domestic helpers, entertainers or factory workers. The sustainability of business or self-employment is still questionable. Age, education and family considerations are other factors that determine returnees’ occupation. With regard to skills, most returnees acknowledged that they had learned some skills from their work abroad (cooking, caring for the elderly/special children/physically disabled, singing and dancing, and use of machines in factories). They also indicated that work related skills like time management, budgeting, getting along with different people were also acquired. However, such skills were not necessarily translated into economic benefits. Social reintegration seemed to be less problematic, although most returnees’ worlds revolved mainly around their family. Returned women would assessed their migration experiences as rewarding for both the economic gain and the wealth of experience of living in another culture.

Indonesia

The Indonesian case study was conducted in Yogyakarta Special Region in three villages in Temon Sub-district of Kulon Progo Regency which have high rates of returned female migrants. 133 returned migrant labourers were interviewed. Almost half of the sample graduated from elementary school and were married with four to five children. Before their departure, most of them were involved in domestic and agricultural activities. They had no experience in migration. Arabic countries were major destinations for Indonesian female workers from Kulon Progo (78%), followed by Singapore (5.8%) and Brunei and other more minor destinations. Most of them stayed abroad 3.9 years on average. Almost half left Indonesia for the first time between the age of 21-30 years.

---

2 The study in Indonesia was undertaken by Drs. Sukamdi and Setiadi from the Centre of Population Studies, Gadja Mada University in Yogyakarta.
The decision to migrate was made mainly by the women themselves (81%). Many women sought recruitment services outside their locality because the private companies outside Yogyakarta were larger and they promoted themselves well. They also provided loans which were later repaid from the salary of borrowers. Government recruitment services were slow and complicated, which encouraged women to bypass their services and regulations. Migrant women obtained information about overseas work primarily from agents and friends. Some of the information sources were biased by giving only the positive aspects of work in Arabic countries. However, some women chose to go to Saudi Arabia despite the generally lower salary and potentially more difficult working conditions (compared to other destinations) because there was an opportunity for them to do the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The individual impact of migration on household life appeared to be that, as a result of the strengthened economic position of the migrant wife, the husband had a less dominant role in the relationship. But there was not much change in the domestic work distribution. Women only gained more independence in their decision-making. At the family level, migrants generally said that there was no change in their relationship with their children (12.8% of strained relationship). Some complained that they became a stranger to their own children. Similarly, most women confirmed that they had a good relationship with their husband (66.9%) but a small number indicated that infidelity, gambling and extravagant use of remittances were problems which had arisen with their husband. In terms of domestic job allocation, husbands and members of the extended family handled the jobs while women worked abroad. Not all migrants’ departures were welcomed by the family (despite the improvement in the family’s financial status) and there was room for possible conflict between the migrant and her husband or parents (80.5% preferred women to stay at home).

Material gains resulting from remittances were not necessarily linked with the migrant family’s status in the community. Retention of the values of communalism, obedience to traditional norms and bonds, and the quality of the relationship between the returned migrant and her children seemed to account more vis-à-vis social acceptance.
Income from overseas employment was spent buying rice fields, land and vehicles for transport. Some migrants started a business such as a garage, or they paid debts or put aside savings. Returnees faced difficulties in the local labour market once they came back home. Migrant workers from Kulon Progo needed protection both while working abroad and with economic and social reintegration after their return.

Thailand

The mobility of Thai women for overseas employment started later than the Philippines and Indonesia. It was only in the early 1990s that female workers migrated for work abroad.

From a sample of 93 returnees residing in the North, Northeast and Central Thailand, most of them were married (68%), over the age of 32 years, had finished primary school (67%), and had one to two children (80%). The majority (52%) of the sample worked in the agricultural sector before migration, 19% were factory workers and another 19% were employees. Most of them (57%) had worked outside their villages before going abroad, some with relatives or friend in Bangkok. The remainder had never worked outside their villages. However, both categories came from villages where people had gone to work abroad before (71.4%). Female workers stated economic reasons as the push factor for their migration (low income and debts). 66% of the sample had to take on new debts in order to pay for the expenses of job recruitment and travel arrangements. 75% made the decision to go to work abroad by themselves. Major work destinations of the sample women were Hong Kong, Israel, Japan and Singapore. They were hired as factory workers, domestic helpers and agricultural workers. (Sex workers were deliberately not included in this sample).

Private job placement agencies or brokers went into villages to recruit females as well as male workers to work abroad. For destinations where migrant workers were not allowed, female migrants entered illegally, using indirect travel routes such as going through New Zealand or the

---

3 The study in Thailand was conducted by Kannika Augsuthanasombat at the Asian Research Center for Migration, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.
United States in order to enter Korea and Japan. This made the costs of travel arrangements more expensive. In Taiwan, Thai female workers were mostly hired in factories (electronics, textile and vehicle). Those who went to Israel were engaged in agricultural work and domestic work while those to Hong Kong were all domestic helpers and those in Japan worked illegally in factories. Returnees from Taiwan had the highest health problems. The implementation of a mental health questionnaire revealed that Thai female workers’ stress was caused by the destination country, monthly salary and legal status of work. Those who went to Japan, had a high salary of more than 50,000 Baht (approximately US$1,250) per month, and who were working illegally were under the most stress. Apart from mental health problems, Thai women also experienced unwanted pregnancies, accidents at the workplace, abuse by employers and disputes with other workers.

In Thailand, the extended family generally supported women in doing housework and child rearing when female workers were abroad. 60% of the sample got help from parents and siblings while only 15% got this help from their husband. This is reflected in the fact that women trusted their parents more than their husbands. 44% of the sample remitted their salary to parents and only 14% to their husband. This remittance was mainly used for paying debts (61%). Only 9% was spent for investment. On an average, a female returnee could save up to 150,000 Baht (US$3,750) during their overseas employment.

The return process of female migrants was not a smooth one. Most of them (64%) returned because the work contract had ended. 85% of the sample stated that they wanted to re-migrate while only 15% planned to stay. There were no attractive job waiting for them in Thailand: returnees worked either as agricultural workers (44%) or were unemployed (37%); a few started their own business (10%) or went to factory work (7%). Thus, economic reintegration of female returnees was an unresolved problem. Acquired skills were not used except by agricultural workers who returned from Israel to their own farm. It can be assumed that labour migration had a positive impact on women in terms of economic gains (better materialistic quality of life for the family, debt repayment) as well as social benefits (chances to learn about a new culture and new work habits). However, social costs such as mental health problems, accidents in the work place, abuse, as well as
family disruptions did occur. Once those women returned to Thailand, the positive and negative impacts persisted. Economically, women became vulnerable because of the reduced or non-existent income and continuing debts. Socially, they were more accepted by their family, kin and community and they gained more self confidence. Nonetheless, they were at more of a distance from old friends, their own children and husband. Some were spoiled by their comparatively extravagant lifestyle overseas. Some were expected by friends to be more generous with them due to their better financial status.

Yunnan (China)\textsuperscript{4}

The case study in Yunnan is a unique one since it involved undocumented female migrants who all moved to Thailand to work, most in entertainment and service work. The study was conducted in Menglian county of Simao Prefecture, Yunnan province bordering Myanmar. It focused on 56 returnees who were predominantly ethnic Dai (closely linked to the Tai outside Thailand and the Thai in Thailand). Of the 56 returnees, 36 were married, 12 were divorced, and the remaining 12 were single. Forty women had children (one to two children). Their husbands and parents looked after these children when the women were away. Most female returnees were between the ages of 20-30 (29 women) which means that they were comparatively younger when they migrated to Thailand than women in the other studies. The majority had finished primary school and worked on a farm, a few (eight persons) had their own business and six worked as entertainers in Yunnan. Most women made their own decision to migrate for work.

The migration route from Menglian went through the villages near the China-Myanmar border, crossing the border to Kengtung, Tachilek then again cross the Myanmar-Thai border to Mae Sai, the border town in northern Thailand. Some female migrants stayed in the North and some went down to Bangkok and other towns. Women usually needed facilitators to help them in their travel and crossing border checkpoints.

\textsuperscript{4} The study in Yunnan was conducted by Allan Beesey (from the Asian Research Center for Migration, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand), Zhang Hongwen, He Zhixiong and Liu Hui (from The Sociology Institute of Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, China).
Therefore, traffickers or human smugglers were available to help them to reach the Thai border for a charge of approximately 3,000 Baht (US$750). They also helped them to go through roadblocks and checkpoints in Thailand. Some respondents obtained a fraudulent identity card while in Thailand.

Most women in this study were employed as masseuses (19), and nine were employed as short-term contract labourers. The rest worked as housemaids, cleaners, bar workers, sales clerks, dishwashers, traders or were self-employed. Several women said that they were deceived into sex work, with only a few admitting to actually having worked as sex workers. Female migrants from Yunnan did not receive a high income. The majority (27 persons) earned US$125-250 per month while 14 respondents earned less than US$60 a month. The low earnings in conjunction with exploitation (in the forms of paying bribes or paying police officials or pimps) made remittances irregular. Only 29 respondents remitted money home. The others tended to carry cash back with them upon return. Such remittances and hand carried cash were used for living expenses, house repair or building, paying debts, education and savings. It is interesting to note that the women who had the most money did not get it from working but from being minor wives or mistresses to foreign business men in Thailand (Taiwanese and Japanese).

While staying in Thailand, female migrants from Yunnan encountered various kinds of difficulties: not having identity papers, language difficulties, missing home, weather conditions, sexual abuse and health problems (including the contraction of HIV/AIDS). Many of them did not know where to go to for help when they encountered such problems.

Many female migrants commuted between Yunnan and Thailand many times (up to five times) staying a few months to five years. The majority stayed longer than a year. Most made the decision to return themselves. Few were arrested and repatriated (3 respondents). Many returnees wanted to go back to Thailand to earn more money. Married women had problems with husbands who practiced polygamy, were heavy drinkers or gamblers. Some were divorced or were in the process of divorce due to these problems, which occurred both during and after women's migration. Economically, there were no jobs in Menglian for
returnees, forcing many women to make plans to re-migrate. Economic motivation and the need to escape the restrictions they felt in their home life and other difficulties pushed women to migrate and re-migrate. Thailand was praised as a friendly country, as well as a land of opportunity. The downside of the migration experience was generally either untold or forgotten.

Discussion

The above-mentioned findings can be discussed according to the various stages of female international migration: causes of migration, conditions of women before departure, working conditions abroad and the return process.

With regard to causes, although the study finds that most women decide to migrate on their own rather than being told to do so by the family, it also indicates that such a decision is made in the context of family and kinship networks, particularly kinship ties and rearing functions of the household as suggested by Selier (1986). The study also confirms the concept of responsible or dutiful daughter as the preferred migrant who will reliably send home remittances (Salaff 1981, Young 1985 and Trager 1988). This is the case for most Asian female migrants who migrate for the good of their family. Thus, it would be worthwhile conducting further studies into whether the familial preference for women to migrate has something to do with the structuration approach and gender in migration. Is there an asymmetrical distribution of power relations in the family related to gender which increasingly compels women to move? (cf. Giddens 1987 : 61).

Social networks play an important role in encouraging and facilitating women’s migration. They also provide them with social safety nets while they are away. What Salaff (1997) raised as an important factor in generating such networks is confirmed for religion: Christian women from the Philippines and Muslim women from Indonesia have religious networks to assist them and they are good at creating such gendered networks. However, the study cannot make any conclusions with regards to the influence of class because our sample consisted solely of working class women.
Although women are good at creating networks and benefiting from them, it is somewhat paradoxical that migrant women do not adequately use such networks for access to critical resources, especially information about recruitment and conditions of work in destination countries. It seems that many of them still rely on the myth of successful migration and are not ready to intelligently raise questions concerning their own safety and security to such networks. On the contrary, some networks used are merely the informal recruiting agencies that target new victims and are ready to provide them with false or distorted information. What Ellis, Conway and Bailey (1996) pointed out in terms of gender differences towards access to critical resources in migration should thus be further looked into.

With regard to conditions of work in destination countries, data from the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand confirmed that domestic helpers were the most vulnerable to abuse and violence by employers if they live in the same households (see Shah and Menon 1998). The concept that domestic work is reproductive work which is de-valued and is taken for granted (Truong 1996) prevails among migrant domestic helpers themselves, especially those from Indonesia. Restricted privacy indicated the lack of employment standards for foreign domestic workers as remarked by Stasiulis and Bakan (1996). Data about abuse of woman in the entertainment industry is not clear, partly because women in this sector did not want to share their experiences abroad, and partly because the work is often illegal, which could be cause for harassment in itself if made known. However, some life stories from the Philippines and data about women in the entertainment sector from Yunnan indicated incidents of sexual harassment among female workers in this sector.

This exploitation leads to the question of vulnerability. While some literature emphasises the need to protect female migrant workers due to their vulnerability, being “migrants and women” (Lim and Oishi 1996) or as “vulnerable migrant domestic helpers” (Heyzer and Lycklama 1989, Shah and Menon 1998), we have to be more analytical about the vulnerable instances in the female migrant worker’s life. This will be elaborated further later on.
The return process of female migrants in this study seems to be more problematic than their departure. Except in the case of Indonesia, most returnees overwhelmingly expressed an intention to go abroad again, confirming the failure of economic reintegration and sustainable livelihood after repatriation. There is very little work done on this stage of labour migration, leaving room for future research.

This study does indicate that a lack of good economic reintegration programmes is common for all countries. Most women return to very little in the way of economic opportunities: either back to farm work, to the local factory or to housework, after a period of two to three years of high productivity abroad. The only incentive for their return seemed to be the social recognition from their family, friends and community. As Hugo (1995) suggested: husbands have increased respect for the returned wives, and there is a breakdown in the genderised division of labour for housework in which men used to minimally share the burden. There are also new social relations with neighbours and community as found in the case of returnees from Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Yunnan. Yet, we should not forget the negative social impact of migration on returnees, to name some, family disruption due to husbands’ infidelity or other bad habits like gambling and drinking, the estrangement between mothers and their left-behind children as in the case of Filipino returnees. Hondagneu-Setelo and Avila (1997) discussed the new mothering, “trans-national mothering” – those mother who continue their mothering role even when they are away from their children. Few cases fitted with his observation.

The debate on female international migration based on evidence in Southeast Asia may lead to considerations and understandings on the following:

**Trafficking and Human Smuggling**

It is often perceived that human trafficking originates in the Southern countries. Female migrants from the South are at risk of being stigmatised as sex workers. In this study it was indeed found that some Southern female migrants who are engaged in entertainment work are partly involved directly or indirectly in the sex business. Some women from Yunnan were assisted to come to work in brothels and massage
parlours in Thailand. Concurrently, some migrant women from the Philippines and Thailand worked in snack bars and karaoke bars in Japan. These women were able to leave their country to work undocumented in destination countries, primarily with the help of various social networks. Traffickers in female migrants mainly took the form of unregistered recruitment agencies or individuals such as friends, neighbours or distant relatives. The aforementioned unregistered agencies are linked with trans-national trafficking networks in destination countries in the North. But it must be stated that there were very few cases of coercion in the sampling. Many women decided voluntarily to migrate to work in the sex service, hoping to earn higher incomes. In some cases deception lay the provision of false information; either with regards to promises of inflated future earnings or with a concealment of the debts which would be incurred through travel costs, and fees charged for documentation and employment arrangements made by traffickers. Most of the time, women were confined to their work place, in brothels or dormitories, not because they were forced to stay but because their undocumented immigration status made wandering about in public risky. In this respect, even a revised definition of trafficking to include the process of controlling women after bringing them across the border by traffickers can be invalid, since the women are not controlled in a strict sense by traffickers, but are controlled by the legal constraints of the society in which they are working. Thus, the inclusion of the “control” element to the definition of trafficking can only partially strengthen its coverage. In this study, some women from Yunnan were knowingly smuggled across borders to work in the sex service. They were neither forced, deceived nor controlled. Human smuggling is a more appropriate term to describe their mobility. It should be noted that there are ramifications of trafficking which can be obviously seen in the strict immigration controls in Northern countries (Manuel Carballo: Discussion at the Seminar on Future of Asylum and Migration organised by the Netherlands chapter of the Society for International Development (SID) at the Hague, September 2000), which can be said to violate women’s human rights. For example, the institution of strict body investigations at customs, and the requirement of an invitation or love letters from
boyfriends in Northern countries in order for Southern women to obtain a visa. Paradoxically, some recruitment agencies or mail-order bride companies in the North are actually playing the role of legal trafficking of female migrants from the South without proper control or supervision. The Yunnan case study gave us insightful information on how human smuggling can operate at the local level and that border town development can accelerate people smuggling. In addition, it became clear that smuggled persons are not permanent victims. They can turn themselves into voluntary migrants or commuters who manage their own migration based on past experience. However, findings about the level of stress among Thai returnees indicates that illegal entry and undocumented status can be detrimental to women’s mental health, even after their repatriation. Such social costs of human smuggling are reported in this study.

**Vulnerability and Empowerment**

Whether female labour migrants are vulnerable or empowered due to their international work has long been discussed and is often emphasized in research works on female migration (Truong, 1996). In this study, one of the objectives was to examine and answer this question. Findings indicated that women could be both vulnerable and empowered at different stages of the migration process. If we separate the process into two stages: during migration and after migration, we find a combination of both circumstances as shown in the following matrices:
Matrix 1  
Stage One: During Migration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vulnerability</th>
<th>Empowerment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Matrix 2  
Two: After Migration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vulnerability</th>
<th>Empowerment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Matrix 1, the women’s economic and social circumstances are presented with regards to their vulnerability and empowerment during the process of migration. In the study, it was found that most women are economically empowered while they are working abroad because they can earn more, make savings and remit money to the family at home. However, these female migrants are socially vulnerable because they sometimes experience exploitation in the work place, physical violence or sexual harassment. They have limited access to social safety nets in destination countries. Many are engaged in work which is under-valued and taken for granted, or even stigmatized.

In Matrix 2, the conditions of female returnees are reversed after their return. Many women reverted to their former employment or to their role as housewives. Their source of income was not as good as when they were abroad. Thus, they become vulnerable economically. Some even lost their savings in their attempts to invest in a business. There are very few cases of female returnees running their own business successfully. On the other hand, returned women were mostly more confident and more assertive. Their family and neighbours respected them. Thus, one can conclude that women are more empowered socially after their return. It should be noted that there were a few cases of difficulties in family life as a result of the labour migration. These
took the form of husband's estrangement and infidelity, divorce, and spoiled children. Consequently, female migrants can experience both empowerment and vulnerability in the social dimension of their life. Exploitation in various forms, physical and mental abuse in the workplace, violence and harassment which occurred during employment as stated in some studies (Heyzer and Wee 1994, Lim and Oishi 1996, Shah and Menon 1998) did not continue when they returned. On the contrary, returned women seemed to be keener on solving their own family problems than before they migrated. Thus, the complexity of social vulnerability of female migrant labourers once they return home requires further study. This study can only inform that social vulnerability maybe overstated in female migration literature and that it does not occur at the same degree during the whole migration process.

Return and Reintegration

As there was limited information about returned female migrants, one focus of this study was on the return and reintegration process. Findings revealed that most female migrants decided to return to their home country because they could not remain in the destination country, i.e., because of the termination of work contract or because they were repatriated. A high percentage of returnees insisted that they would go overseas to work again if they could. However, not all returnees could re-migrate easily, with the possible exception of Filipino returnees. For the rest, their temporary solution was to stay in the home country while looking for possible opportunities to go overseas again. Reintegration may be an unavoidable choice for most returnees, with the failure to reintegrate being a major push factor for women to move again.

Economic reintegration is a major issue because the motivation for most women's departure was economic. Returning home means leaving a good income behind. As most women were hired in the manufacturing and service sectors, there are often no equivalent jobs waiting for them at their hometown or in their country of origin. They have to go back to farm or factory work, do odd jobs or struggle to start a business. None of those choices is promising: farm work means either no or a small income, factory work means a lower income than abroad and they may be considered too old or "spoiled" to return there by employers, odd jobs are an unstable source of income, and starting a business requires
capital and management skills. Despite all those limitations, most returnees had to choose one of these options. Otherwise they were left with the alternative of spending their overseas-earned savings for living on. Most skills (except agricultural skills) acquired abroad were not used once they return home. Hence, attempts at economic reintegration made most returnees vulnerable.

The social costs after return are more ambivalent. Women from all four countries in the study confirmed that they gained self confidence and independence after the migration experience. In a way, they might have developed a new social construction of their migrant self after staying in new social contexts abroad and having learned new work habits such as self-discipline. But it is too soon to conclude whether such self perception or new habits, which could be their own social capital, actually help them to find better jobs, to earn more income, or to play a more significant role in their family and community life. One possible result of female labour migration is a change in their health condition, including mental health. Respondents from most case studies stated that their health before and after migration was better than when they were abroad. In this study, an attempt to measure the mental health problems of female returnees was one of the goals, since previous literature could not tell us much about this. The result of the test can be confirmed only for Thailand where the research team engaged the services of an expert psychologist to analyse and interpret the test results. From the small sample of 98 respondents, the study can confirm that there were two cases of returnees who had mental health problems and their problems were significantly related to their illegal status in destination countries, their high income, and the stress of living in Japan. Hence, some of the social costs of labour migration, in terms of mental health problems, are shown in the Thai case study.

Family disruption is also another problem confronted by many female returnees. A number of spouses, whether Muslim, Christian, or Buddhist, shared an enthusiasm for extra-marital relationships, gambling and drinking. Such practices arose especially when the women were absent from home and were obviously detrimental to the family and were possible causes of separation and divorce.
To conclude, the study on female labour migration in Southeast Asia found that female migrant returnees are economically vulnerable due to lack of sustainable livelihood in the home country. They also are vulnerable in some social aspects - for example with their health or the quality of their family life. On the other hand, social recognition for women's achievements and their new qualities of independence and self-confidence can be regarded empowering them. The migration experiences provide women with a better social status but economically worse conditions after return. Thus, this mobility is both for better and for worse to the female migrants themselves. It is a challenge how we can change the negative conditions which forced women into vulnerability into positive ones.
References


Chantavanich, Supang. (2000) Executive Summary, “Research Project Thai Labour Market in East and Southeast Asia: During Economic Downturn Toward The End Of The Decade Of The Nineties”. Asian Research Center for Migration, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

Chantavanich, Supang, Suteera Nittayananta, Prapairat Ratanaolant – Mix, Pataya Ruenkaew and Anchalee Khemkrut. (1999) *The Migration of Thai Women to Germany: Causes, Living Conditions and Impacts for Thailand and Germany*. Asian Research Center for Migration, Chulalongkorn University Thailand


Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette and Avila Ernestine (1997) “I’m Here, But I’m There”; The meaning of Latina Transnational Motherhood” *Gender and Society, 11,* (5) October


